Indigenous People

INDIGENOUS WOMEN: TAKING CONTROL OF THEIR DESTINY

"Now the women are rising up. And when the women rise up from a nation, they are the strongest voice that can be heard and it's a voice that cannot be silenced."

Diane Reed,
President of the Cree Society
for Communications

As part of the crusade that led to the recognition of the international indigenous movement, indigenous women in all parts of the world are organizing themselves and creating their own networks and groups to voice their concerns and hopes.

The Fourth World Conference on Women (4-15 September 1995, Beijing, China) and the United Nations International Decade of the World's Indigenous People (1995-2004) are providing indigenous women with unique opportunities to increase public awareness of their situation. Indigenous women's special concerns include survival of their communities and of their cultural identity and recognition of the central role of women in the efforts to advance the interests of indigenous people everywhere. They hope that these two United Nations events will result in decisions by UN Member States to adopt constitutional reforms incorporating the rights of indigenous people and that more countries will ratify the ILO Convention No. 169, which calls for the protection of the rights of indigenous and tribal peoples.

More and more indigenous women are taking the lead in supporting their communities and have been in the forefront in advancing the cause of their people. Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchu Tum, a Mayan Indian, was internationally honoured for promoting the human rights of indigenous people. She lived in exile in Mexico from her native Guatemala, a country ravaged by a long and destructive civil war, for more than 10 years and used her own personal experience of torture and injustice to fight for the rights of Indians everywhere. In 1992, she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her activities in promoting peace.

Participation of indigenous women in national political structures, though insufficient, is increasing. Some indigenous women now participate in national politics at the highest levels. In Ottawa, for instance, Mary Simon, an Inuit, was recently appointed Canada's first Ambassador for Circumpolar Affairs (the circumpolar nations being Canada, the United States, Russia, Finland, Norway, Sweden, Iceland and Denmark, under whose authority the Home Rule Government of Greenland administers the territory of 42,000 Inuit). Miss Simon will be dealing with environmental questions and the effects of development projects on people.

Many more women are not internationally known but are making a difference in their societies. In Colombia, Eulalia Yagari at the age of 14 and against her father's will, was the first woman in her community to participate in a public awareness meeting on land recovery, a process successfully used by some indigenous groups to regain possession of their ancestral lands. In Eulalia's village, 900 people were living on 60 hectares of land.

Because of her work, her community was eventually granted more land as a result of the land recovery campaign.

Eulalia also played an important role within her tribe in trying to revive their cultural traditions. She consulted with the elder women of her tribe who taught her old songs and stories. She later taught the music to children in the village's childcare centre, a cultural programme that gave the children a new sense of pride and self-esteem. Today, Eulalia is a member of the Provincial Assembly of Antioquia, in the north-west of Colombia, and is still devoting herself to social issues to alleviate the distress of her people.

Indigenous women face tremendous challenges. Like most women in the world, they have been victims of discrimination for centuries. But as indigenous women, they have been doubly discriminated against — for being indigenous people and for being women.

Discrimination against indigenous people has included forcible removal from their traditional lands; exclusion from mainstream political, economic and social spheres; and genocide.

As indigenous women, in certain communities, they have often been kept in a situation of dependency. They have been marginalized, refused access to land or subjected to other forms of discrimination.

In certain regions, the status of indigenous women was greatly reduced at the time of colonization, with the imposition of new political, economic, social and cultural systems. As stated at the Forum on Indigenous Women of Ecuador,

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which was held from 7 to 11 September 1994, *"Colonialism comes down to the loss of our lands, to the introduction of a language with no sense of poetry, of an irrational political and administrative structure irrespective of the laws of nature, and of the forceful imposition of a Judaeo-Christian religion in which woman is synonymous with sin."*

Once indigenous women played an important role in their communities: they were, alongside with men, part of the decision-making processes affecting the future of the whole group. They were consulted and their words listened to. They were respected.

In many cases, the introduction of foreign values destroyed this equilibrium. It had a negative impact on the relationship between men and women, as well as on women's role within their communities. Women were relegated to a position of secondary importance and the traditional complementarity of roles was broken.

In their daily lives, within their families and communities, indigenous women deal with hardships stemming from lack of basic services and inappropriate or no education, among other problems. These factors greatly impair their ability to fully participate in society.

Education and training

Generally speaking, the authoritarian approach of most educational systems imposed on indigenous people did not take into consideration the importance of traditional and cultural values of these populations. Rather, the educational systems emphasized integration of indigenous groups into the national mould. Most indigenous children usually failed to adapt to these systems and, as a result, indigenous communities have very high illiteracy rates and poor educational qualifications. In Bolivia, for instance, schooling levels of indigenous people are three years less than for non-indigenous, and the difference is greater for indigenous women.

Innovative measures have been recently introduced to remedy this situation. At schools in Guatemala and Bolivia, for example, indigenous children are taught in their own languages as well as in Spanish, helping to preserve their cultural identity. In certain areas, an education system based on linguistic and cultural diversity has been developed for each ethnic community.

Poor education means that most indigenous women can expect low wages, if they can find jobs at all. According to a report released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) in 1991, aboriginal women usually obtain qualifications in the traditional 'female fields' of health, education and office skills. Those without qualifications mainly work in the informal sector as domestic or farm labourers.

Thus, indigenous women find it very difficult to escape the cycle of extreme poverty, exploitation and low-paid employment. According to the International Labour Organization, incomes earned by Aboriginals in Australia are half the national average and Aboriginal unemployment is five times higher than the national unemployment rate.

There is no doubt that investing in women — giving priority to women's education and training — ultimately benefits all the members of the community. And for indigenous women, appropriate education is especially important since they are often the primary guardians and transmitters of their rich, diversified culture. In Bolivia, the United Nations Voluntary Fund for the International Year of the World's Indigenous People financially supported a project by the *Organizacion de Mujeres Aymaras del Kollasuyo (OMAK)* to teach Andean indigenous women the concept of democracy and human rights. The project emphasized the importance of the process of voting as a significant step towards enabling indigenous women to empower themselves and have their concerns included on the national political agenda. The training was carried out through a series of seminars and radio programmes.

Economic and social aspects

The empowerment of indigenous women is the key to better standards of living. Women themselves want to be given the means and the tools to increase their independence. The concept of empowerment has been clearly described in the words of an Aboriginal woman from Australia *"If you came only to help me, then you can go back home. But if you consider my struggle as part of your own survival, then perhaps we can work together."*

There has been a dramatic shift in the general concept of technical assistance, which used to impose without consultation a certain kind of development on the populations concerned, thus creating long-term dependency. This top-down approach proved to be very ineffective. Now, emphasis is being put on self-reliance and independence.

The importance of women's participation in the development

process of their country has been recognized and stressed in various United Nations fora. Some United Nations agencies have engaged in bilateral programmes with indigenous communities to enable them to regain some economic autonomy. Indigenous women prove to be very receptive to income-generating activities. In Guyana, for instance, a UNDP project helped revive the traditional skill of the woven Wapishana hammock and market it. Hammocks of higher quality were produced and sold at US$400 a piece instead of the $15 previously obtained.

With many men from indigenous communities migrating to urban areas in search of employment, women do have to take on greater responsibilities.

In spite of their strong involvement and participation in the economic aspects of their communities, indigenous women are still confronted with harsh social problems. Poverty and the lack of job opportunities that affect these communities give rise to alcoholism, drug abuse, domestic violence and prostitution. "*Once Were Warriors*", a recent movie produced in New Zealand and directed by the Maori Lee Tamahori, vividly portrays the disintegration of a Maori family affected by domestic violence and the difficulty of coping with cultural conflicts, a reality of life for many of that country's indigenous people.

Another area of concern for indigenous women is limited access to medical care. At the Forum of Indigenous Women of Ecuador, women drew attention to the alarming deterioration of health conditions within their communities. Even though many villages are provided with basic health services, these services are still inadequate and do not cover the needs of the population.

In 1990, for instance, in Ecuador, out of 1,000 births, 517 indigenous children died of respiratory and intestinal infections or malnutrition — easily curable diseases. Certain governments maintain that the reason for the absence of adequate medical facilities was because of the remoteness of tribal communities rather than neglect, and also the reluctance of certain indigenous groups to use the available health centres.

In Venezuela, the Anu people of the Laguna de Sinamaica face serious health problems due to industrial development which has caused environmental problems: water is highly polluted, and fish, the main source of food, are increasingly scarce. Consequently, indigenous populations in the area suffer from malnutrition and various diseases. Local organizations have launched projects involving women and designed to improve health conditions, to teach women about immunizing children, nutrition and hygiene as well as women's health issues.

The land tenure situation is also a major issue for indigenous people. In northern Arizona, in the United States, indigenous families have been resisting relocation from their reservations, in the face of private developers taking over their commmunities' land and sacred sites. To support their action, a group of elder women have organized themselves and started a weaving project. Through the sales of hand-woven rugs, women supply resisting families with income for survival. The rugs are being sold in 24 States and in 1991, the income derived from the sales amounted to US$ 500,000.

The determination of indigenous women to take charge of their destinies is unequivocally expressed in the growing number of indigenous women who are taking on leadership roles in their communities and participating in national and international fora. At the international level, the Decade of the World's Indigenous People provides an excellent opportunity for indigenous women to develop new relationships with the United Nations system and other indigenous groups around the world, thus laying the ground for greater cooperation and communication. Strengthening these partnerships will greatly enhance local and national efforts to solve the problems faced by indigenous women around the world.

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